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The Way to the Kingdom:

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S E R M O N

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M A R K i. 15.

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The Kingdom of God is at hand: Repent ye, and believe the Gospel.

THESE words naturally lead us to consider, First, The nature of True Religion, here termed by our Lord, *The kingdom of God*, which, saith he, *is at hand*: and Secondly, The way thereto, which he points out in these words, *Repent ye, and believe the gospel.*

I. 1. We are, First, to consider, The nature of True Religion, here termed by our Lord, *The kingdom of God*. The same expression the great Apostle uses in his Epistle to the Romans, where he likewise explains his Lord's words, saying, *The kingdom of God is not meat and drink: but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.* Chap xiv. ver. 17.

2. *The kingdom of God*, or True Religion, is not meat and drink. It is well known, that not only the unconverted Jews, but great numbers of those who had received the Faith of Christ, were notwithstanding *zealous of the Law*, (Acts xxxi. 20.) even the Ceremonial Law of Moses. Whatsoever therefore they found written therein, either concerning meat and drink-offerings, or the distinction between clean and unclean meats, they not only observed themselves, but vehemently pressed the same, even on those among the Gentiles (or heathens) who were turned to God. Yea, to such a degree, that some of them taught, wheresoever they came among them, *Except ye be circumcised,*
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and keep the Law, (the whole Ritual Law) ye cannot be saved. Acts xv. 1. 24.

3. In opposition to these, the Apostle declares, both here and in many other places, That True Religion does not consist in Meat and Drink, or in any ritual observances; nor indeed in any outward thing whatever, in any thing exterior to the heart; the whole substance thereof lying in *righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.*

4. Not in any outward thing; such as forms or ceremonies, even of the most excellent kind. Supposing these to be ever so decent and significant, ever so expressive of inward things: supposing them ever so helpful, not only to the vulgar, whose thought reaches little farther than their sight; but even to men of understanding, men of stronger capacities, as doubtless they may sometimes be: yea, supposing them, as in the case of the Jews, to be appointed by God himself; yet even during the period of time wherein that appointment remains in force, True Religion does not principally consist therein; nay, strictly speaking, not at all. How much more must this hold concerning such rites and forms, as are only of human appointment? The Religion of Christ rises infinitely higher, and lies immensely deeper than all these. These are good in their place; just so far as they are in fact subservient to true Religion. And it were superstition to object against them, while they are applied only as occasional helps to human weakness. But let no man carry them farther. Let no man dream, that they have any intrinsic worth: or that Religion cannot subsist without them. This were to make them an abomination to the Lord.

5. The nature of Religion is so far from consisting in these, in Forms of worship, or Rites and Ceremonies, that it does not properly consist in any outward actions, of what kind so ever. It is true, a man cannot have any Religion, who is guilty of vicious, immoral actions; or who does to others, what

what he would not they should do to him, if he were in the same circumstance. And it is also true, that he can have no real Religion, who *knows to do good, and doth it not*. Yet may a man both abstain from outward evil, and do good, and still have no Religion. Yea, two persons may do the same outward work, suppose feeding the hungry, or clothing the naked: and, in the mean time, one of these may be truly religious, and the other have no Religion at all: for the one may act from the love of God, and the other from the love of praise. So manifest it is: that although true Religion naturally leads to every good word and work, yet the real nature thereof lies deeper still, even in *the hidden man of the heart*.

6. I say, of *the heart*. For neither does Religion consist in *orthodoxy* or *right opinions*; which although they are not properly outward things, are not in the heart, but in the understanding. A man may be orthodox in every point; he may not only espouse right opinions, but zealously defend them against all opposers: he may think justly concerning the incarnation of our Lord, concerning the ever blessed Trinity, and every other doctrine, contained in the oracles of God: he may assent to all the three Creeds; that called the Apostle's, the Nicene, and the Athanasian: and yet it is possible, he may have no Religion at all, no more than a *Jew, Turk, or Pagan*. He may be almost as orthodox as — the devil; (though indeed, not altogether; for every man errs in something; we cannot well conceive him to hold any erroneous opinion) and may all the while be as great a stranger as he, to the Religion of the heart.

7. This alone is Religion, truly so called: this alone is in the sight of God of great price. The Apostle sums it all up in three particulars, *Righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost*. And first, Righteousness. We cannot be at a loss concerning this, if we remember the words of our Lord describing the two grand branches thereof,

on which hang all the Law and the Prophets. *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy soul, and with all thy * strength. This is the first and great commandment, the first and great branch of Christian Righteousness. Thou shalt delight thyself in the Lord thy God: thou shalt seek and find all happiness in him. He shall be thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward, in time and in eternity. All thy bones shall say, Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee! Thou shalt hear and fulfil his word who saith, My son, give me thy heart. And having given him thy heart; thy inmost soul; to reign there without a rival, thou mayest well cry out, in the fulness of thy heart, I will love thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my defence: my Saviour, my God and my might, in whom I will trust: my buckler, the horn also of my salvation and my refuge.*

8. And the second commandment is like unto this; the second great branch of Christian Righteousness is closely and inseparably connected therewith, even *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Thou shalt love*—Thou shalt embrace with the most tender good-will, the most earnest and cordial affection, the most inflamed desires of preventing or removing all evil, and of procuring for him every possible good—*Thy neighbour*—that is, not only thy friend, thy kinsman, or thy acquaintance; not only the virtuous, the friendly, him that loves thee, that prevents or returns thy kindnes; but every child of man, every human creature, every soul which God hath made: not excepting him whom thou never hast seen in the flesh, whom thou knewest not either by face or name: not excepting him whom thou knowest to be evil and unthankful, him that still despitefully uses and persecutes thee. Him thou shalt love as thyself; with the same invariable thirst after his happiness in

* Mark xii. 30.

every kind; the same unwearied care to screen him from whatever might grieve or hurt either his soul or body.

9. Now is not this love *The fulfilling of the Law*? The sum of all Christian Righteousness? Of all inward Righteousness; for it necessarily implies *Bowels of mercies, humbleness of mind, (seeing love is not puffed up) gentleness, meekness, long-suffering, (for love is not provoked, but believeth, hopeth, endureth all things)* and of all outward Righteousness; for *Love worketh no evil to his neighbour, either by word or deed. It cannot willingly either hurt or grieve any one. And it is zealous of good works. Every lover of mankind, as he hath opportunity, doth good unto all men; Being (without partiality and without hypocrisy) full of mercy and good fruits.*

10. But true Religion, or a heart right toward God and man, implies happiness as well as holiness. For it is not only Righteousness, but also *peace and joy in the Holy Ghost*. What peace? *The peace of God, which God only can give, and the world cannot take away; the peace which passeth all understanding, all (barely) rational conception; being a supernatural sensation, a divine taste of the powers of the world to come: such as the natural man knoweth not, how wise soever in the things of this world: nor indeed can he know it, in his present state, because it is spiritually discerned. It is a peace that banishes all doubt, all painful uncertainty; the Spirit of God bearing witness with the spirit of a Christian, that he is a child of God. And it banishes fear, all such fear as hath torment; the fear of the wrath of God, the fear of hell, the fear of the devil, and in particular, the fear of death: he that hath the peace of God, desiring (if it were the will of God) to depart and to be with Christ.*

11. With this peace of God, wherever it is fixed in the soul, there is also *Joy in the Holy Ghost*: joy wrought in the heart by the Holy Ghost, by the ever-blessed Spirit of God. He it is that worketh in us that calm, humble rejoicing in God, through Christ

Christ Jesus, by whom we have now received the atonement, the reconciliation with God; and that enables us boldly to confirm the truth of the Royal Psalmist's declaration, *Blessed is the man (or rather happy) whose unrighteousness is forgiven, and whose sin is covered.* He it is that inspires the Christian soul, with that even, solid joy, which arises from the testimony of the Spirit, that he is a child of God: and that he gives him to rejoice with joy unspeakable, in hope of the glory of God: hope, both of the glorious image of God, which is in part and shall be fully revealed in him; and of that crown of glory, which fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for him.

12. This holiness and happiness joined in one, are sometimes stiled in the inspired writings, *the kingdom of God*, (as by our Lord in the text) and sometimes, *the kingdom of heaven*. It is termed *the kingdom of God*, because it is the immediate fruit of God's reigning in the soul. So soon as ever he takes unto himself his mighty power, and sets up his throne in our hearts, we are instantly filled with this *righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost*. It is called *the kingdom of heaven*, because it is (in a degree) heaven opened in the soul. For whosoever they are that experience this, they can aver, before angels and men,

“ Everlasting life is won :
Glory is on earth begun :”

According to the constant tenor of Scripture, which every where bears record, *God hath given unto us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son (reigning in his heart) hath life;* (even life everlasting) 1 John v. 11, 12. For *this is life eternal, to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent*, John xvii. 3. And they to whom this is given, may confidently address God, though they were in the midst of a fiery furnace,

“ Thee

“ Thee—Lord, safe-shielded by thy power,
 Thee, Son of God, *Jehovah*, we adore;
 In form of man descending to appear:
 To thee be ceaseless hallelujahs given.
 Praise, as in heaven thy throne, we offer here:
 For where thy presence is displayéd, is heaven.”

13. And this *kingdom of God* or of heaven is at hand. As these words were originally spoken, they implied, that *the time* was then *fulfilled*, God being *made manifest in the flesh*, when he would set up his kingdom among men, and reign in the hearts of his people. And is not the time now fulfilled? For *lo!* saith he, *I am with you always*, you who preach remission of sins in my name, *Even unto the end of the world*. (Matt. xxviii. 20.) Wheresoever therefore the gospel of Christ is preached, this his *kingdom is nigh at hand*. It is not far from every one of you. Ye may this hour enter thereinto, if so be ye hearken to his voice, *Repent ye and believe the gospel*.

II. 1. This is the way. Walk ye in it. And first, repent, that is, know yourselves. This is the first repentance, previous to faith; even conviction, or self-knowledge. Awake then thou that sleepest. Know thyself to be a sinner, and what manner of sinner thou art. Know That corruption of thy inmost nature, whereby thou art very far gone from original righteousness, whereby *the flesh lusteth* always *contrary to the Spirit*, through that *carnal mind which is enmity against God*, which is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. Know that thou art corrupted in every power, in every faculty of thy soul; that thou art totally corrupted in every one of these, all the foundations being out of course. The eyes of thine understanding are darkened, so that they cannot discern God or the things of God. The clouds of ignorance and error rest upon thee, and cover thee with the shadow of death. Thou knowest nothing yet

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as thou oughtest to know, neither God, nor the world, nor thyself. Thy will is no longer the will of God, but is utterly perverse and distorted, averse from all good, from all which God loves, and prone to all evil, to every abomination which God hateth. Thy affections are alienated from God, and scattered abroad over all the earth. All thy passions, both thy desires and aversions, thy joys and sorrows, thy hopes and fears, are out of frame, are either undue in their degree, or placed on undue objects. So that there is no soundness in thy soul: but *from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot* (to use the strong expression of the prophet) there are only *wounds and bruises and purifying sores*.

2. Such is the inbred corruption of thy heart, of thy very inmost nature. And what manner of branches canst thou expect to grow, from such an evil root? Hence springs unbelief, ever departing from the living God: saying "Who is the Lord that I should serve him? Tush! Thou, God, carest not for it." Hence independence, affecting to be like the Most High; hence pride in all its forms, teaching thee to say, "I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing." From this evil fountain flow forth the bitter streams of vanity, thirst of praise; ambition, covetousness; the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. From this arise anger, hatred, malice, revenge, envy, jealousy, evil-surmisings: from this all the foolish and hurtful lusts, that now *pierce thee through with many sorrows*, and if not timely prevented, will at length *drown thy soul in everlasting perdition*.

3. And what fruits can grow on such branches as these? Only such as are bitter and evil continually. Of pride cometh contention, vain boasting, seeking and receiving praise of men, and so robbing God of that glory which he cannot give unto another. Of the lust of the flesh come gluttony or drunkenness, luxury, or sensuality: fornication,

nication, uncleanness, variously defiling that body, which was designed for a temple of the Holy Ghost: of unbelief, every evil word and work. But the time would fail, shouldest thou reckon up all; all the idle words thou hast spoken, provoking the Most High, grieving the Holy One of *Israel*: all the evil works thou hast done, either wholly evil in themselves, or at least, not done to the glory of God. For thy actual sins are more than thou art able to express, more than the hairs of thy head. Who can number the sands of the sea, or the drops of rain, or thy iniquities?

4. And knowest thou not, that *the wages of sin is death*? Death not only temporal, but eternal. *The soul that sinneth it shall die*; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. It shall die the second death. This is the sentence, to be *punished* with never-ending death, *with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power*. Knowest thou not that every sinner, not properly, *is in danger of hell fire*, that expression is far too weak: but rather, *is under the sentence of hell-fire*, doomed already, just dragging to execution. Thou art guilty of everlasting death. It is the just reward of thy inward and outward wickedness. It is just, that the sentence should now take place. Dost thou see, dost thou feel this? Art thou thoroughly convinced, that thou deservedst God's wrath and everlasting damnation? Would God do thee no wrong, if he now commanded the earth to open and swallow thee up? If thou wert now to go down quick into the pit, into the fire that never shall be quenched? If God hath given thee truly to repent, thou hast a deep sense that these things are so; and that it is of his mere mercy thou art not consumed, swept away from the face of the earth.

5. And what wilt thou do to appease the wrath of God, to atone for all thy sins, and to escape the punishment thou hast so justly deserved? Alas, thou canst do nothing: nothing that will in any wise

wife make amends to God, for one evil work, or word, or thought. If thou couldst now do all things well, if from this very hour, till thy soul should return to God, thou couldst perform perfect uninterrupted obedience, even this would not atone for what is past. The not increasing thy debt would not discharge it. It would still remain as great as ever. Yea, the present and future obedience of all the men upon earth, and all the angels in heaven, would never make satisfaction to the justice of God for one single sin. How vain then was the thought, of atoning for thy own sins by any thing thou couldst do? It costeth far more to redeem one soul, than all mankind is able to pay. So that were there no other help for a guilty sinner, without doubt he must perish everlastingly.

6. But suppose perfect obedience for the time to come, could atone for the sins that are past, this would profit thee nothing; for thou art not able to perform it; no, not in any one point. Begin now. Make the trial. Shake off that outward sin that so easily besetteth thee. Thou canst not. How then wilt thou change thy life from all evil to all good? Indeed, it is impossible to be done, unless first thy heart be changed. For so long as the tree remains evil, it cannot bring forth good fruit. But art thou able to change thy own heart, from all sin to all holiness? To quicken a soul that is dead in sin? Dead to God and alive only to the world? No more than thou are able to quicken a dead body, to raise to life him that lieth in the grave. Yea, thou art not able to quicken thy soul in any degree, no more than to give any degree of life to the dead body. Thou canst do nothing, more or less, in this matter; thou art utterly without strength. To be deeply sensible of this, how helpless thou art, as well as how guilty and how sinful, this is that *Repentance not to be repented of*, which is the forerunner of the kingdom of God.

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7. If to this lively conviction of thy inward and outward sins, of thy utter guiltiness and helplessness, there be added suitable affections, sorrow of heart, for having despised thy own mercies, remorse, and self condemnation, having the mouth stopped, shame to lift up thine eyes to heaven; fear of the wrath of God abiding on thee, of his curse hanging over thy head, and of the fiery indignation ready to devour those who forget God, and obey not our Lord Jesus Christ: earnest desire to escape from that indignation, to cease from evil and learn to do well: then I say unto thee, in the name of the Lord, *Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. One step more and thou shalt enter in. Thou dost repent. Now, Believe the Gospel.*

8. *The Gospel* (that is, good tidings, good news for guilty, helpless sinners) in the largest sense of the word, means, the whole revelation made to men by Jesus Christ: and sometimes the whole account of what our Lord did and suffered, while he tabernacled among men. The substance of all is, *Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Or, God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, so the end we might not perish, but have everlasting life. Or, he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed.*

9. Believe this, and the kingdom of God is thine: By faith thou attainest the promise. "He pardoneth and absolveth all that truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel." As soon as ever God hath spoken to thy heart, "Be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee," his kingdom comes; thou hast righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.

10. Only beware thou do not deceive thy own soul, with regard to the nature of this faith. It is not (as some have fondly conceived) a bare assent to the truth of the Bible, of the Articles of our Creed, or of all that is contained in the Old and

New Testament. The devils believe this, as well as I or you; and yet they are devils still. But it is, over and above this, a sure trust in the mercy of God through Jesus Christ. It is a confidence in a pardoning God. It is a divine evidence or conviction, that *God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not imputing to them their former trespasses*: and in particular, that the Son of God hath loved me: and that I, even I, am now reconciled to God by the blood of the cross.

11. Dost thou thus believe? Then the peace of God is in thy heart, and sorrow and sighing flee away. Thou art no longer in doubt of the love of God: it is clear as the noon-day sun. Thou criest out, *My song shall be always of the loving-kindness of the Lord: with my mouth will I ever be telling of thy truth, from one generation to another.* Thou art no longer afraid of hell, or death, or him that had once the power of death, the devil: no, nor painfully afraid of God himself; only thou hast a tender, filial fear of offending him. Dost thou believe? Then thy Soul doth magnify the Lord, and thy spirit rejoiceth in God thy Saviour. Thou rejoicest in that thou hast *Redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.* Thou rejoicest in that spirit of adoption, which crieth in thy heart, *Abba, Father!* Thou rejoicest in a hope full of immortality, in reaching forth unto the mark of the prize of thy high calling; in an earnest expectation of all the good things which God hath prepared for them that love him.

12. Dost thou now believe? Then the love of God is now shed abroad in thy heart. Thou lovest him, because he first loved us. And because thou lovest God, thou lovest thy brother also. And being filled with love, peace, joy, thou art filled with long-suffering, gentleness, fidelity, goodness, meekness, temperance, and all the other fruits of the same Spirit: in a word, with whatever dispositions are holy, are heavenly or divine. For while thou beholdest with open, uncovered face, (the veil being taken away) the glory of the Lord, his glorious love, and the glorious image wherein

wherein thou wast created, *thou art changed into the same image, from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord.*

13. This repentance, this faith, this peace, joy, love; this change from glory to glory, is what the wisdom of the world has voted to be madness, mere enthusiasm, utter distraction. But thou, O man of God, regard them not: be thou moved by none of these things. Thou knowest in whom thou hast believed. See that no man take thy crown. Whereunto thou hast already attained hold fast; and follow, till thou attain all the great and precious promises. And thou who hast not yet known him, let not vain men make thee ashamed of the Gospel of Christ. Be thou in nothing terrified by those who speak evil of the things which they know not. God will soon turn thy heaviness into joy. O let not thy hands hang down. Yet a little longer, and he will take away thy fears, and give thee the spirit of a sound mind. *He is nigh that justifieth: who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died; yea rather that rose again; who is even now at the right-hand of God, making intercession for thee.* Now cast thyself on the Lamb of God, with all thy sins, how many soever they be; and *an entrance shall now be ministered unto thee, into the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!*

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